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# ***A Study into the Lived Experiences of Deaf Entrepreneurs: Considerations for the Professional***

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## **Abstract**

The number of deaf people owning a business has increased exponentially over the years, making this a worthy subject for exploration and research. Especially in today's economy, entrepreneurship, or the process of establishing and maintaining a business venture, has become a viable career option for many deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Insights will be offered from the author's phenomenological research on the lived experiences of deaf entrepreneurs and business owners. Unique themes have been found in this study, and topics relevant to professionals in their support of deaf consumers in the creation of their business ventures are discussed.

*Keywords: deaf entrepreneurs, vocational rehabilitation, deaf businesses,  
careers for the deaf, phenomenology*

The economic challenges in the last few years have presented greater challenges for those professionals who are charged with supporting deaf and hard of hearing people with their goals in obtaining meaningful employment. Small businesses, organizations with fewer than 500 people, have created the fastest growing segment of business in the United States in the past 25 years. This segment produced 54% of all employment growth in 2004 (Reynolds, 2007). In 2005, about 15 million people in the United States were in the process of organizing and starting up 7 million new firms. Approximately 5 million people were managing 2 million businesses up to 42 months old (Reynolds, 2007). The rise in the number of people taking risks to go into business for themselves or to create enterprises underscores the need for more research in the general area of entrepreneurship as a driving force in today's economy. This, coupled with the slow growth in traditional careers due to a weaker economy, has created a situation in which professionals need to seek other options to support their deaf consumers. By looking at the current situation and by looking at some of the insights provided by a research study into the lived experiences of deaf entrepreneurs/business owners, issues will be illuminated and taken into consideration for possible solutions to the problem. This article will provide a background into deaf entrepreneurship, show assertions from a recent study, and offer discussion for professionals who work with deaf and hard of hearing consumers.

## **Deaf Entrepreneurship**

The number of deaf people owning their own business ventures has increased in the last ten years. An international Deaf Nation Expo was held in Las Vegas in 2010 and 2012. At the two expos, approximately 25,000 deaf and hard of hearing people attended representing a large number of deaf-owned businesses. Before the National Deaf Business Institute was dissolved in December 2012, the most updated directory of Deaf-owned businesses showed 639 businesses. The number is likely much higher, with the creation of many new businesses over the last few years.

### **Methodology**

Because of the growing instances of deaf people becoming entrepreneurs, it is important that we gain a deeper understanding of the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. By focusing on the lived experiences of the study participants, a phenomenological study focused on the description of the nature and the meaning of the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. In phenomenological research, the researcher collects data from the individuals who have experienced a specific phenomenon, distills the data and creates a composite description of that phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997).

### **Method**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 participants. The primary research question answered in this study was, "What is the essence of deaf entrepreneurs' experience?" Using the long-interview method, each participant was interviewed for 60-90 minutes and each interview was videotaped and transcribed into text for analysis. The data was analyzed and organized and a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals was developed. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of those entrepreneurs who are deaf in the context of creating their ventures and sustaining those ventures and to generate new knowledge in the area of deaf entrepreneurship.

### **Participants**

The participants in the study were purposively selected in accordance to Crammate's (1968) definition of "deaf" and having had been an entrepreneur/

business owner for at least two years. The definition of "deaf," taken from Crammatte (1968), is "persons deaf to the extent that their communication was visually oriented; that is their reception of communication was through the eyes—reading written messages, reading lips, observing gestures and clues, or using a structured visual language such as American Sign Language."

The participants were selected through contact with the NDBI and through the author's own personal network. The 14 deaf participants represented a wide variety of industrial experiences, number of years of experience, communication methods, organizational structures, and organizational sizes. Two of the organizations were non-profit enterprises. One of these non-profits was a smaller one, with 28 employees, and the other one had roughly 1,300 employees. Three of the participants had failed business ventures and were in the midst of creating new business ventures at the time of the study. One had just launched her third venture a week before her interview. Another was well into his third year of a newly created venture. The average age of the participants was 47 years, and the average number of years of their business venture was 13 years. Names of participants in this study have been changed to protect their privacy.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

Through an coded analysis of the transcribed text from the interviews, six essential themes emerged from the study: (1) pursuing their passion with experience and skill; (2) running their enterprise through collaboration, networking, strategy and understanding of the market; (3) reflecting on their identity as a deaf person and how it impacted their experience; (4) building bridges to the rest of the world using communication strategies; (5) having a support network; (6) desiring to make an impact on the world. These themes were present among deaf entrepreneurs/business owners in all types, sizes, and structures of businesses. The themes are represented by the diagram on the next page.

Of interest to professionals serving deaf and hard of hearing consumers are the themes that are relevant in the advisement of consumers and in supporting their outcomes for gainful employment and overall contribution to society. While the study had six emergent themes, this specific article focuses on data from three specific themes of interest; (1) pursuing their passion with experience and skill; (2) running their enterprise through collaboration, networking, strategy and understanding of the market; (3)

building bridges to the rest of the world using communication strategies.

### **Theme One: Pursuing their Passion with Experience and Skill**

The first theme was described as the deaf entrepreneur's pursuit of their passion with experience and skill.

All the other five themes were connected to this central theme and in their own ways supported the theme. Many of the entrepreneurs discussed how they created their business venture from a passion of theirs, whether it was a vocation or an avocation. For some of these participants, their ventures were established as a result of a lifelong dream. Frank discussed how he dreamed of owning a business when he was younger:

When I was in college, or even high school, I dreamed of owning a business. I was thinking about the different kinds of businesses I could set up. When I was working at the store as a manager, I was always watching how the owner would run the business, and how they made it successful and how they managed their employees. I considered that training on how I could own a successful business.

Of importance is the need for entrepreneurs to establish a field that fits with their goals and interests, mainly those that they are passionate about. As an example, Jasper described his experience in establishing his current social enterprise after having had two business failures:

I experienced two business failures before setting up this organization. This is my third venture, and it is finally successful, because I am doing something that I am really passionate about. I am enthusiastic about



this organization and I want to keep it going. It is important that you have passion for the business you want to set up, not something that will just help you get money, because that can really hurt you.

Many of the participants underscored the need for experience and skill to be able to get into a business in order to obtain the knowledge needed for the enterprise. Paul continued to explain that it was important for him to really understand the business and to always be learning:

I speak to students at Gallaudet University often. If you were to set up a business, make sure you understand the business. I spent 25 years in the computer services industry developing software programs. I knew the business from the technical side, but I didn't know well enough about the marketing side (of the business), so that was the only area I really had to learn. I had to convince the customer why they should use me instead of these other huge companies. You also need to learn as you go.

Additionally, some of the participants discussed the importance of other outside training offered for owners of small- or medium-sized businesses. Experiences were mixed in terms of the level of training offered and the amount of help provided through these organizations. Buddy discussed his experience of receiving training through the Small Business Association (SBA):

So, what I decided to do was to attend a training course in (my town) that was sponsored through the SBA ... so I took the three-day class and I had a nice female instructor. She was well-known and she wrote a book on setting up a business. She was extremely helpful even though she didn't understand the insurance business specifically. She did understand how to set up a business. There were 20 of us in the class with diversified business backgrounds and interests.

To round out the first theme, Taylor offered her input on what is important to her as an entrepreneur:

You have to love the job and be motivated. For me, it is all about loving this type of work. I am having a lot of fun with it. Yes, it is a lot of work and very time-consuming, but if you are doing the right thing and you are on the right path, you are okay.

The first theme, pursuing their passion with experience and skill, was an essential ingredient in the participants' experience as a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. In order for the participants to pursue this passion, the second theme describes how they ran their business.

### **Theme Two: Running Their Enterprise Through Collaboration, Networking, Strategy and Understanding of the Market**

The second theme was what the deaf entrepreneurs saw as another essential theme in their experience, the ability to tap into their networks and to collaborate with other stakeholders to help build their organization. For example, some of these participants were plugged into the deaf community network, which allows them to grow their business through a specific targeted community. Others were plugged into networks that are not specific to the deaf community, for example local entrepreneur groups, industry networks and social networks. Informal networks helped Charlotte to yield even more contacts with the people she needed to talk with to grow the business:

I did a lot of informal networking and made a lot of contacts and I held on to them. I kept seeing them for lunch, and kept following up with them. I kept helping them out and vice versa. So, I had a really strong network in place, so when I went to start my company, I already had a pocket of people to talk to in D.C. about business and opportunities.

Samuel expanded on this concept further through his description of how his business depended on his own network. He developed this network while working for another company:

I think the most important thing for me when I was working with the company was that I was developing

a network. This network helped me to be ready when I set up my own business in my own home.

There was discussion with the participants about the primary markets that they serve through their business. Some of the participants talked about catering only to the deaf market and others talked about the need to go beyond the deaf market to expand their enterprise. Some enterprises marketed exclusively to the deaf community and others marketed entirely outside of the deaf community. There were also some enterprises that initially were targeted to the deaf community, but the enterprise expanded to include other markets. Many of the entrepreneurs discussed the need to branch out their business beyond the deaf community, or even entirely outside the deaf community. Samuel described his experience in needing to expand beyond this market:

The work with other deaf-owned businesses is very limited, but there is a lot of work with hearing-owned businesses. You need to contract with a variety of clients, government clients, and other hearing owned companies. There are many more opportunities out there than just with the deaf owned businesses.

Bill stated that his initial vision was to cater exclusively to the deaf and hard of hearing market, but that he realized he could not survive on this market alone so he built up his business and catered to the general market:

We are not really exactly at that point yet, so we are not yet serving the deaf and hard of hearing community. The economic situation is still unsettled. In the meantime, I have not given up and I still am committed to carry out the vision that I had before.

Bill added that he has to make his business plan broad in order for it to work in the current economic environment. He said, "We cannot survive with only the deaf and hard of hearing market. I have to make my business plan broad, and multi-dimensional. I can't just have one narrow niche, it has to be broad."



In his non-profit organization, Jasper discussed the need to raise additional funds to support his venture. He stated, "This year we are going to be focused on fundraising and grant writing. Hopefully we will see some funds to help support our efforts and we can then move on." Charlotte described her experience in growing the business to the point where they are ready to seek angel investing; angel investing is when a wealthy investor(s) invests in a small start-up in exchange for equity in the business or proceeds of the profits:

We are a lot better positioned for angel financing. Two years ago, we thought we could get the money just like that (snaps fingers), which actually wasn't the case. We were still bootstrapping. We haven't gotten our first round of financing yet.

Greg talked about his desire to secure angel funding, and expressed his frustration in trying to achieve this:

We need capital to do more. I have many goals and dreams for my company, but at the same time, I need capital. I have met with angel investors. I have given presentations to these angel investors with an interpreter. This was a struggle for me.

Some of the participants discussed their experience in working with the SBA and its programs, including the U.S. Government 8A program, in which businesses can achieve favored status as vendors for governmental agencies. When Taylor checked into the SBA, she did not find anything that was useful for her:

I tried the SBA but there was a not a lot there either. I expected more assistance in things like setting up a bank account, business license, but I didn't get any information about that. I was like, "Huh?"

Samuel specifically sought out help through the U.S. Government 8A program for favored vendor status. He moved his business to Baltimore and he thought he would be able to tap into opportunities presented through the 8A program because he would be geographically closer to a lot more government agencies:

When I first moved to Baltimore, I have to admit that I did have high expectations. I thought that maybe because I was deaf, I would get more work through the 8A process. I didn't know about Section 8A through the SBA, so my mentor taught me how to complete all of the paperwork to apply for this designation ... It's great that they provide interpreters, well, since the government requires this. ... We are all sitting around and chatting and they would make the comment that having the 8A designation is a joke. This made me feel discouraged.

The second theme was extracted through the deaf entrepreneurs/business owners' examples of how they leveraged their networks, made decisions whether to market specifically to the deaf community. The third theme focuses on an important issue for these individuals, communication strategies while running their enterprises.

### **Theme Three: Building Bridges to the Rest of the World Using Communication Strategies**

Because of a need to collaborate and work with hearing people in their businesses, communication strategies were discussed heavily during the study. While all of the deaf entrepreneurs had different communication styles, they all adopted communication techniques in various forms in order to effectively interface with hearing stakeholders in their enterprise. Communication barriers were a common theme for these entrepreneurs. Differences in communication strategies were also attributed to the type of business that the entrepreneur ran.

Frank described his main challenge as an owner of an automotive business by stating, "My main challenge at that time was the use of the phone." Ed also reiterated that by saying, "The number one barrier was communications, especially in telecommunications." Charlotte stated, "Communication on the phone has been the only boundary for me." Bill explained his challenge as being complicated because of his communication challenges:

I have one bank with four offices and that was a challenge because I can't just pick up the phone and call people and do my business on the phone. One way

around that is through the use of email or through a webcam, but the kind of business that I am in is a service business. The best way to do business is in person or through the phone. Email is not good enough, so I have had to drive around a lot. It is important for me to have a strong network and that has helped me to communicate more effectively.

Charlotte further described her experience with communication on the phone and her feelings with using the phone:

Really, the only challenge is the technology for telephone communication. I can get on a (telephone) conference call but I don't like to. I would much rather do a video chat, but not all of the angel investors or the content providers are tech savvy. So they prefer a landline or a regular telephone, so that's really the only challenge. I just do my best, I use the phone, but I am not comfortable with it. I use Sprint Captel™ as a back-up, and I always have that ready in case I don't understand what they are saying.

A number of communication tools were discussed, from using in-house staff to the use of technology to the use of mainstreamed techniques such as e-mail and text messaging. A number of entrepreneurs discussed the use of video relay services (VRS) and telecommunications relay services (TRS), both of which are federally-funded services accessed via the Internet.

Although videophone technology and VRS are considered significant technological advances that have really helped deaf people to communicate with each other and with hearing people, experiences with using VRS were mixed among the participants. For some, because of the quality of VRS interpreters, phone calls were often not smooth. Ed recounted his experiences in using VRS for business dealings. He indicated he had to depend on his staff to make calls for him when he contacted his buyer about a proposal that he had submitted. He explained his rationale and discussed when he would actually use the services:

I would have to call the buyer through VRS, which is never smooth for me. So, I have to depend on my

Atkins: A Study into the Lived Experiences of Deaf Entrepreneurs: Consider people to make the calls. I noticed a new thing that I was not aware of before. Most of the time I am not satisfied with the VRS service because of the quality of signing. I won't make any sensitive calls through VRS; I will make simple calls through VRS, that's it.

Greg discussed the value of using smart phones and email to help operate his business. He described how he has designed his company around the use of existing technology that is available.

Again, technology through smart phones and email is the key. I know that I cannot do this without technology. Also, I designed my company and developed our business plan based on what we can do with existing technology. I look at that as a big factor. That's the kind of strategic thinking that I am starting to do on a regular basis now. It has become second nature and automatic for me.

The third theme described how these participants used communication strategies to run their ventures. These three themes discussed in this article underscore the fact that it is important for professionals to be armed with appropriate information for the guidance of their deaf consumers to positive employment outcomes. In the next section, considerations for professionals are outlined.

## **Discussion and Implications for Professionals**

The participants in this study described that previous work experience played an essential role in the development of their businesses. It has been suggested that other forms of human capital and business human capital – the owners' education level and prior work experience in a business whose goods and services were similar to those provided by the owner's business are important determinants of business outcomes (Fairlie & Robb, 2008; Morris & Lewis, 1995). Prior work experience at a firm providing similar goods and services was likely to provide the owner with specific human capital that allows them to succeed in their venture. Most deaf entrepreneurs created their business ventures based on "push factors" – which means they created their business ventures after having being laid off or underemployed (DeMartino, Atkins, Barbato, & Perotti, 2011).

Passion or interest in the business being established is critical in the sustainable creation of small businesses. Small business management was described as a very labor-intensive process. If one loves what they do, then the process becomes more bearable, not less labor intensive. During the author's research, it is noted that a large number of deaf-owned businesses are businesses that are borne from the deaf person's hobbies or areas of interests. These are called "lifestyle businesses" and can be a source of income if cultivated properly (DeMartino et al., 2011). To help consumers succeed in their employment goals, this needs to be a factor in making decisions on whether or not the process should be supported through vocational rehabilitation and counseling. Additionally, internships, further education and training may be prudent in getting the consumer the knowledge and experience in the area of the business that they choose. Many of these deaf-owned businesses are considered "lifestyle" businesses, which usually start off as sole proprietorships. This then makes an investment into self-employment worthy of consideration for deaf consumers. According to an earlier study, many deaf-owned businesses start off with investments from families and friends (Pressman, 1999). Capital was often found in this study to be difficult to obtain, especially at the initiation of the start-up business. While this is true for all entrepreneurs, there may be an extra layer of obstacles because of the generally marginalized nature of the deaf community.

Policies to promote entrepreneurship and business owners among disadvantaged groups are widespread. For example, there are currently more than 500 non-profit programs providing loans, training, or technical assistance to disadvantaged entrepreneurs (Fairlie & Robb, 2008). The focus of many programs for minority and disadvantaged firms is on providing more access to financial capital (Fairlie & Robb, 2008). There is very little evidence that these programs or policies have focused their efforts on individuals in the deaf community. Rather, most of the efforts have been focused on ethnic and women populations. The deaf entrepreneurs in this study have expressed concern that they were not able to find specific resources or programs that could help them with their business venture creation. In light of this, other programs should be considered to foster entrepreneurial activity among this population. Specifically, programs such as the SBA Section 8A program, while geared towards generating more small business ownership among minority groups, have not recently been tailored to meet the unique needs of deaf people. A number of participants in this study expressed concerns that the 8A program does not meet their needs for establishing their ventures.

The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998, contained in Title IV of the Workforce Investment Act, has two specific references to self-employment and establishment of small businesses under state vocational rehabilitation programs. The language in these amendments makes it clear that Congress intends for self-employment to have viable employment outcomes. Funding limits are established by state policy and can be used for items such as business plan development, small business training, tools and equipment, rent for start-up period, and computers used for business operations. Because of this clear mandate, professionals need to be equipped and prepared to support consumers in their employment outcomes, which may possibly include the option of self-employment. Entrepreneurship and/or small business ownership clearly falls within this category.

The participants in this study stressed the need for mentorship as a part of their experience. While not all of them had such mentors, the ones who had mentors explained how important it was in the establishment of their businesses. Mentoring needs to play a larger role in the development of nascent deaf entrepreneurs. Mentoring opportunities may lead to the development of human and social capital required to develop a business. Mentoring support combined with information on the needs of entrepreneurs at specific times in their development may represent an efficient and effective support mechanism (Sullivan, 2000).

There have been new strides in technology with the personal computer, the Internet, cell phones, social media, SMS, and text messaging. This allows contact between deaf and hearing people to be on a level playing field so that it is not necessary to identify oneself as deaf when communicating with others. In a text-based relationship, such as an online relationship or text-based business contacts, it is no longer necessary for the other person to know about the interactants' identity as a deaf person (Power & Power, 2006). The participants in the study used a number of conventional technological strategies. At the same time, there have been new and creative applications of existing technologies used by the deaf entrepreneurs in this study. Professionals will do well to become versed in such technologies as a way to support consumers.

Opportunities to be self-employed are ripe for deaf people. It is apparent that entrepreneurship has become a viable career option for individuals, especially those who are deaf. Armed with the appropriate resources and tools, potential for an increased number of self-employed deaf individuals

exist. As professionals, it becomes our responsibility to further cultivate these opportunities for consumers.

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